The physical environment of Washo territory is marked by its variety of terrain, climate, flora, and fauna, primarily due to variations in altitude within a comparatively small area. The Sierra Nevada rises gradually to the east of the central valley of California from near sea level to peaks over 10,000 feet in altitude, then it drops abruptly on the eastern slope to about 5,000 feet. Generally the Washo lived at 4,500 to 5,500 feet in the valleys east of the Sierra Nevada; around 5,500 to 7,500 in the highlands; and their treks took them down to 3,000 feet on the west side of the Sierra. This gave them a wide range of habitats in mountain-valley terrain.

The highlands and western slopes had yellow pine, fir, and hemlock vegetation; a transitional and boreal life zone; humid mesothermal and microthermal climates; and zones receiving between 10 to 60 inches of annual precipitation. In the mountains the summers are warm, with rains through July. Snows start in November, followed by cold weather with freezing nights until April.

In the lowlands to the east of the Sierra Nevada the Washo had pinon and juniper vegetation, an upper sonoran life zone, and an arid-cold-steppe climate (Elsasser 1960, 3-6). These areas have 100-140 days of growing season and all farming requires irrigation (Department of Economic Development n.d.). The weather station at Minden, Nevada is 4,730 feet above sea level. It has recorded an annual precipitation of 8.73 inches, an average growing season of 144 days from May 29 to September 20, a high maximum temperature of 109° F. and a low maximum of -24° F.

Throughout Washo territory the average variability of annual precipitation is around 20-25%. In the months of December through February 60-70% of possible sunshine is received and the figure is 80-90% in the months of June through August.

The mountains and lakes (especially Lake Tahoe), the high percentage of sunny days, and legalized gambling in Nevada make tourism the major industry in Washo territory today. Cattle raising and dairying are the most important agrarian industries. Lumbering and mining are of minor importance (Department of Economic Development n.d.).

Compared with other tribes in the Great Basin the Washo occupied a very abundant environment. Hamilton described the Truckee River country in 1844 as "a hunter's paradise, with the streams full of fish and blue grouse in every direction" (Sieber 1951, 162). This abundance is reflected in the fact that the Washo had a higher population density than any other Great Basin tribe. Kroeber (1947, 137) gives a figure for the Washo that comes out as 2.4 square miles per person. The average population density for all of the Great Basin was roughly 15 square miles per person (Steward 1938, 46).